

Structural ambiguity and SE: What could a clitic tell us about VP-internal composition?

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It is a challenge for current theory to explain how certain readings of the Romance clitic *SE/SI* emerge with a given (sub)type of verb and not with another using a single underspecified meaning or set of functions for this clitic. Here we consider verb formation combining a causative V^o and an abstract P to account for structural ambiguities exposed by a little-discussed reading of *SE* in Spanish. The proposal lines up with data from other languages supporting similar analyses (Harley 2002), following a configurational contrast widely defended in the literature (Larson 1990). The paper basically builds on the idea that availability of diverse grammatical functions for *SE* can also be seen as a window into finer structural contrasts among verbs with apparent similar makeup but crucially different behavior. In Spanish, a structural ambiguity suggested by *SE* brings out a contrast between an otherwise uniform class of verbs: while some change-of-possession[COP] verbs (Levin 1993) give passive-impersonal readings (α) ((1)a, COPs *vender* ‘sell’, *soltar* ‘release’, *perder* ‘lose’, *abandonar* ‘abandon’, *pagar* ‘pay’); others, including respective counterparts (*comprar* ‘buy’, *agarrar* ‘grab’, *ganar* ‘win’, *encontrar* ‘find’, *cobrar* ‘cash’ (b-c)) yield also non-passive benefactive-like readings (β). Importantly, β -reading is (i) not available in (1)a; (ii) distinct from reciprocal reading (γ) seen in COP like *asignar* ‘assign’ (c) and its kin.

- (1) a. *Se vendieron (todos los) coches importados.* (SE sell.3P.PST all the cars imported)
(α) ‘All the imported cars have been sold [out]’
b. *Se compraron (todos los) coches importados.* (SE buy.3P.PST all the cars imported)
(α) ‘All the imported cars have been bought *[in/out]’
(β) ‘**They bought all the imported cars for themselves**’
c. *Se distribuyeron (todos los) coches importados.* (SE distribute.3P.PST all the cars imported)
(α) ‘All the imported cars have been distributed’
(β) ‘**They distributed all the imported cars to themselves**’
(γ) ‘They distributed the imported cars among themselves’

The widely-known relation between *SE* and telicity is key to explain (β): the benefactive quirk concurs with an aspectual closure unseen in (α)/(γ). Note the telicity independent of (theme) measure-out (2).

- (2) a. *(Se) {vendieron/perdieron} *({todos los/?algunos}) coches importados en una hora.* (α)
‘*(All the/Some) imported cars were sold/lost within an hour’
b. **(Se) {compraron/ganaron} ({todos los/algunos}) coches importados en una hora.* (β)
‘They got (lit. bought/won) (all the/some) imported cars [for themselves] within an hour’.
c. *(Se) distribuyeron/asignaron *({todos los/algunos}) coches importados en una hora.* (γ)
‘They distributed/assigned (all the/some) imported cars [among themselves] within an hour’

Additionally: even if, initially, not all COP verbs allowing (β)-type systematically occur with dative PP (cf.(8) below), this is no impediment for *SE* to deliver β -readings with a consequent aspectual closure; nor for the verb to accommodate the additional PP expressing the COP beneficiary (not to be confused with unselected affected dative in anticausative *SE*; Mendikoetxea & F.Soriano 2010). Importantly, even this if may seem an instance of the much discussed aspectual *SE* seen with universal quantifiers such as *todo* ‘all’ in consumption verbs (odd (α) reading), the contrast in entailment (completion not correlated with extent of the incremental theme in (3)-(4)b) is key to the fact that the noted telicity fits well with a richer descriptive content related to an implicit location drawn by possession (e.g. FIGURE located in endpoint GROUND defined by the possessor (GOAL)). To this end, lexically-coded (cf.(9)) direction of motion is trivial: *llevar|traer* ‘bring to|from’ both give β -reading and Goal-based scalarity.

- (3) a. *Se comió todo.* (Lit. She ate all) ‘She ate it all [up]’ (\Rightarrow all items have been eaten)
b. *Se compró todo.* (Lit. She bought all) ‘She bought it all [**for herself**]’ (\nRightarrow all items have been bought)
(4) a. *Se comió *(el) postre (*para ella)* (She ate the desert (*for herself) ‘She ate up the desert’
b. *Se compró (el) postre (para ella)* ‘She bought up the desert’/‘She got the desert **for herself**’
(5) a. *Poco a poco se vendieron todos los coches.* ‘Little by little, all the cars were sold’
b. *Poco a poco se compraron todos los coches.* ‘Little by little, all the/every car(s) ended up being theirs’

Analysis. The proposal is coached on Hale & Keyser’s [HK] (2005) theory of P-conflation, but also on Larson’s (1990) theory of base-generation of two different structures. We draw on Hale’s (1996) and Kayne’s (1993) ontology of abstract prepositions to advance the idea that COP verbs allowing (β)

involve a (bi)relational head p^0 like the one found in possessive verbs (cf. Hale 1986, Freeze 1992, Kayne 1993); this p^0 being basically defined as a noneventive head yielding the (SC-like) stative predicate of spatial contiguity (an entity in contact with another entity), amenable in meaning to the lexical P *with* (HK 2002:208, Rapoport 2012, Rigau 2005), or P_{HAVE} (Harley 2002, 2007, see GoalP in Pesetsky 1995). Yet, unlike *have*, here the verb combined with p^0 is not semantically empty: this burden (arguably attributed to V_{CAUSE} , cf. Harley 2002) can be noted in the fact that *comprar* ‘buy’ involves, unlike *have*, a caused COS event producing spatial contiguity (possession) as result: note, namely, the contrast between *conseguir* ‘attain’ (where $(\beta) \approx$ accomplished state) and stative possession verbs like *have*. If correct, *comprar*-like verbs would decompose into two heads: a monadic V^0 and a non-eventive birrelational head (p^0) heading the stative predicate that instantiates the contiguity/GOAL relation lacked by *vender*. **Advantages:** The proposed configuration accommodates this asymmetry in event complexity along with the fact that the semantic relation between the two arguments is actually not one of change but of *stasis*; i.e., the inner state produced by this type of telic COP empirically brought out by *for-x-time* adverbials (6)—cf. the passive (α)-like interpretation in *(se) vendió el coche por una hora* ‘The car was for sale for an hour’—further composing with the basic event (yielded by V_{CAUS}). On this account, the additional benefactive PP in (8) is not unexpected, but rather readily explained as further instantiation of the incorporated P, as confirmed by the hyponym interpretation hence expected (Haugen 2009, Mateu 2012). The triviality of the object to telicity also follows from the proposed configuration (7), inasmuch as this argument is not sitting in the relevant (measure-out) position; instead, P_C is, thus defining telicity accordingly (measuring-out with respect to the entire (possessed) state denoted by the small clause, cf. Harley 2005). Crucially, the distinction is orthogonal to the fundamental opposition between (incremental theme) *measuring-out* and (Goal-dictated) *delimitness* (Tenny 1994) and correlates well with a structural contrast between potential roles of SE in aspectual closure (recall (3)-(4)). If correct, it would be this additional (p_{HAVE}) projection that explains distribution in (1) and the (β) -type reading derived; SE being regarded as silent ‘indefinite’ subject or as a binder of a null subject (Torrego 2013 *i.a.*) serving as adequate controller (8). Note that verbs without P_C do not allow possessors to c-command possessees, and do not give (β) readings, in which Goals c-command themes (which is, in turn, a distribution meeting a basic requisite in HK for P-conflation). In the case of *vender*, arguably lacking P_C , SE can only be handled under passivization; the benefactive PP logically does not occur; and structural organization is arguably different, with THEME generated in the canonical internal position and GOAL(plus the lexical P *a* ‘to’) as a complement (cf. *comprar*, with GOAL generated in spec position and THEME as complement). Interestingly, verbs with meaning seemingly amenable to *vender*, but sanctioning GOAL-BEN (e.g. *dejar* ‘leave’) allow (β) /COP-interpretation with SE (9)a and consequent telicity. Note also the ambiguity of P in motion verbs (also allowing (β) /COP(9)b). **Recap.** On the proposed account, important facts like divergences within otherwise analogous transitive verbs, occurrence of benefactive PPs, argument interpretation receive a unified explanation. More importantly, it allows us to consider the role of SE as an aspectually-relevant element in a way rather different to the one commonly analyzed (Zagona 1996, de Miguel & Lagunilla 2000), but in line with a fundamental opposition (measure-out|delimitness), in strict correlation with argument structure (THEME-|GOAL- dictated telicity). Further work will establish if these observations generalize to Romance; e.g. Italian, which apparently shows the same contrast (although some natives allow (β) in all COPs). Structural asymmetry would help to explain clitic distribution correlated with a contrast between (α)-(β) readings: cf. *la si compra* (ACC.f|SE|buy.3S) ‘one buys it’ vs. *se la compra* (SE|ACC.f|buy.3S) ‘he buys it for himself’ and nontrivial contrasts in participle agreement: *ce la si è comprata* (ppt/obj agr.) giving (α); *ce la si è comprate* (ppt/ subj agr.), only (β).

(6) *(se) compró un coche por una hora.* ‘She bought a car for an hour’ (\approx the car was hers/with her for 1h)

(7) $[_{VP} DP_1^1 [V, P_C [se^i [P_C^0 DP_2]]]]$

(8) *(Los inspectores^s) *(seⁱ) {quedaron/acapararon/incautaron/alquilaron} coches [para ellos^s].*
The inspectors kept/monopolized/confiscated/rented} cars for themselves (\approx they got them by renting)

(9) a. *Se dejaron los coches* ‘They left the cars to themselves’ (\approx they got the cars as result)
b. *Se trajeron/llevaron los coches* ‘They brought/carried the cars to themselves’ (\approx they got the cars).